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The Marathon Mystery

A Story of Manhattan
By BURTON E. STEVENSON
Author of "The Holladay Case"

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When it was over and she was lying again on the couch, panting with a kind of fearful exhaustion, I turned to Tremaine, who was mopping his forehead feverishly.

"I've got a kind of superstitious horror of that snake," he said apologetically as he met my eyes. "I've seen a lot of them, but none ever affected me just as this one does."

"What is it?" I asked, astonished by his pallor, for the trembling of his hand as he put away his handkerchief and reached for a cigarette. He lighted it before he answered, inviting me by a gesture to help myself.

"It's a fer-de-lance," he said at last. "One of the deadliest serpents in the world, and this particular variety is said to be especially deadly, a sort of creme de la creme, as it were. Its bite kills a man in three minutes if it happens to strike an artery. It does more than that. It turns him to a swollen, rotten piece of carrion. I've seen it. And he leaned back to blow a ring toward the ceiling.

I sat, petrified, with my cigarette halfway to my mouth.

CHAPTER VII.

MY acquaintance with the Tremaines in the weeks that followed grew by imperceptible degrees into an intimacy which was one of the most pleasant of my life. Of Cecily I have already attempted to give some idea, although I realize how cold and inadequate it is. As I began to know her better I came to wonder more and more at her complexity, her simplicity, her swift change of mood, her utter ignorance of social convention. Another thing I saw, and that was her absolute worship of Tremaine.

As for Tremaine, I hesitate to say how utterly I fell under his spell. Yet this was not in the least to be wondered at. My life had been on the whole so narrow and his had been so broad; my experience of the world had been cast in the usual grooves, while his had so evidently overleaped them, had struck out a path for itself into all sorts of unexpected places. I have said that his life had been cast in many curious places. Martinique was only the last of these, the most recent, and I gathered that the business which brought him to New York was the forming of a syndicate to build a railroad through the island. Through is the right word, for it was evident that, owing to the island's peculiar formation, there would have to be much tunneling. But he waved all such practical difficulties aside and discoursed of the great future before such a road with an enthusiasm that was absolutely convincing.

I had just come in from dinner one evening and was settling down to a rehearsal of "L'Affaire Lerouge," when there came a knock at the door and Tremaine entered. He was in evening dress and was seemingly much perturbed.

"My dear Cecily," he began abruptly, in that quick, peremptory way which in the deuce of a box, and I'm going to ask you to help me out. I promised Cecily to take her tonight to see the extravaganza at the New York, and have the seats here, but at the last moment I find I can't go away. I've a business engagement that I can't afford to break, but Cecily will never forgive me if I disappoint her. Have you anything on for tonight?"

"No," I answered, looking at him in some astonishment, for it was evident what was coming.

"Then perhaps you wouldn't mind taking Cecily? It would be a tremendous favor."

"Not at all," I assured him, "but—"

"It isn't quite convenient," he finished as I hesitated. "Surely we don't need to stand on ceremony, and Cecily doesn't care a fig for convention. It's a great favor to both of us. She'll cry her eyes out if she has to stay at home, and I simply can't take her."

"Very well," I said, "I'll be glad to take her," and thanking me again he hurried away.

She was dressed and waiting for me when I knocked at her door, and she caught me by both hands as I entered.



"Who is that gentleman?" demanded Cecily.

as she put on a little bonnet and gave her hair two or three final pats before the mirror.

"She was in the highest spirits, singing to herself—really, I told myself, only a child—and at last she swung around and dropped me a courtesy."

"How is that, Cecy?" she cried, smiling up at me. "Does that please you?"

"Charming," I cried, gasping a little, with a feeling of giddiness, as I looked down into her eyes.

Our cab swung around into Broadway, ablaze with light, and Cecily was in the excitement of watching the changing crowd, the brilliant shop fronts.

"Here we are," I said as the cab drew up at the curb, and sprang out and helped her down.

We went up to the promenade after the first act and ate an ice together. The place was crowded, and Cecily soon became the center of attraction. Men strolled past merely to look at her, and from more than one woman I caught a flash of eye that said unutterable things. The advent of a new, incomparable siren could not pass unchallenged. At them all Cecily glanced from time to time with admirable nonchalance. One would have sworn she had been reared in New York. She chatted gaily, eating her ice, sipping her wine, looking at me with eyes that glowed like stars. Then suddenly she looked up her face changed. I glanced up, too, and caught Jim Godfrey's astonished eyes fixed on mine. He bowed and passed on.

"Who is that gentleman?" demanded Cecily eagerly, leaning across the table toward me. "You know him?"

"Oh, quite well," I answered, more and more surprised. "His name is Godfrey."

"Godfrey," she repeated slowly after me, as though fixing it indelibly in her memory. "And what is his business?"

"He's a reporter by trade; he gathers news for a paper," I added, seeing that she did not wholly understand.

"Oh," she said, and breathed a deep sigh of relief. "I see." Then she met my glance she added: "I fancied that I had met him somewhere; I was mistaken. In New York I have met no one except you, m'ieur."

But I scarcely heard her; my eyes had dropped to a pin at her throat. As she leaned forward I could see it very clearly—an opal surrounded by a blaz-hing ring of diamonds. I looked at it mechanically, then with a sudden, instant interest, for one link of that brilliant ring was missing; one of the diamonds had fallen out.

CHAPTER VIII.

I WAS scarcely surprised when Godfrey's card was brought in to me at the office next morning. Both Mr. Graham and Mr. Royce happened to be out at the time, so that I had the inner room to myself, and I directed that Godfrey be shown in at once.

"I was expecting you," I said, rising to shake hands with him. "That stare of yours last night warned me that you'd be around to demand an explanation."

"Demand is hardly the word," he corrected as he sat down. "Bessie would be nearer it. I confess I was never more surprised in my life than when I saw you sitting there calmly chatting away with Mrs. Tremaine."

"Then you have met her? She thought she was mistaken."

"You mean she knew me?" he asked quickly.

"She asked who you were; she fancied she'd met you somewhere."

Godfrey laughed a little dry laugh. "She has," he said, "but it's strange she remembers it, for I'll swear she never looked at me, or perhaps," he added, knitting his brows, "she has some special reason to remember."

I happened to be in the hall of the Marathon apartment house talking with Higgins, the janitor, when she and her husband came in from dinner the night that man Thompson was killed there. Perhaps you remember about it?"

I nodded, smiling.

"Yes, I remember."

"Something in my face caught his attention."

"You mean you know something about it?" he asked quickly. But a movement of feet across the floor outside interrupted him. "We can't talk here," he said. "Will you be at home tonight?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll look you up," and he turned to go.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I'm not with Mrs. Fitch any more."

"Aren't you?"

"No. I'm quartered at the Marathon."

"At the Marathon?"

"Yes. Suit fourteen. Higgins will show you up."

He stared at me an instant with staring eyes. Then the door opened and Mr. Royce came in, followed by two clerks.

"I'll look for you this evening," I added, hugely enjoying his stupefaction.

He nodded mechanically and turned away, walking like a man in a dream.

"Well," began Godfrey as he settled back in his chair and looked around the room, "this is about the last place on earth I'd have expected to find you."

"And yet it's not so wonderful," I pointed out. "I had to change my lodgings and found that these would suit."

"It's in your blood," he went on, smiling. "It has been ever since that affair of Miss Holladay. You'll never get it out. But I'm glad you're here. I've an idea that we're just on the threshold of a very remarkable mystery, and you can help a lot."

"Then the murder wasn't the end?"

"No; I fancy it was only the beginning. Now tell me how you happened to be with Mrs. Tremaine last night."

"Tremaine had an important business engagement," I said, "which he couldn't break. He'd promised to take her to the theater and had secured seats. Rather than disappoint her he asked me to take his place."

"And she didn't object?"

"She made the best of it, I guess."

"She seemed to be getting a good deal of fun out of it."

"She was. She's the most unconventional creature I ever met. She'd interest you, Godfrey."

"I don't doubt it in the least. But Tremaine interests me too. You don't happen to know what his business engagement was?" and he looked at me with a queer smile.

"No. I suppose that it had something to do with his railroad."

(To Be Continued)

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